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Pick It Up or Pass It Up?

One of the hardest parts of learning to index is knowing what to include and what to ignore. When you first start indexing, you have so much to keep in mind. You have to learn your software and at the same time you have to worry about phrasing entries, double posting, making cross-references, keeping information together, etc. It really presents a challenge to hold all the concepts in your mind at one time. So it comes as no surprise that new indexers pick up proper names indiscriminately without thinking through why the author has included them.

You see a proper name, and by gum, you want to make an entry. It sits there so obviously on the page. You recognize a name and rejoice at how easily you can type in that entry. But wait . . . how is the name used in the context? Don't turn on auto-pilot and just enter every name you see.

There are instances when names are used by authors as time markers. For example:

Presidential campaigns from Kennedy to Bush have benefited from the use of televised debates.

In this sentence, neither of the presidents should receive an entry in the index. The author has inserted these names instead of saying "Presidential campaigns from 1960 to 2004 have benefited from the use of televised debates." Likewise a mention of the Civil War or Great Depression very often will not require an index entry. So when the author writes:

Since the Cold War the United States has turned its focus to China's emergence as a major economic player.

He is not focusing on the Cold War at all. The end of the Cold War era means a certain point in time and could be replaced by 1990. You do not want to point a user to this statement when the text here says nothing about the Cold War per se.

Time markers can appear anywhere in a text, but frequently show up in the opening chapter or in the introductory paragraphs of a chapter. In those locations authors like to make broad statements foreshadowing all the detail that they will cover in later pages. It is important to remember not to overindex this material. These early pages or paragraphs are meant to lead to the true discussion, not substitute for that discussion.

Sometimes names and events appear in asides or comparisons. In an index on the executive war power that a subcontractor prepared for me, I saw an entry for "Crowe, Russell." I cruised right by it at first and then said, "Wait a minute – what does Russell Crowe have to say about U.S. constitutional issues?" My curiosity aroused, I looked it up in the text and found that it occurred in the section on high-tech weapons and the use

of telecommunications. The author made a joke about the incident when Russell Crowe hit a desk clerk with a telephone, and how that was not a high-tech use of telecommunications equipment. No one who purchases or uses this book will expect to find out about Russell Crowe from it. The omission of this “joke” reference will not affect the thoroughness or usefulness of the index. It is a passing mention—an aside—and the indexer should pass it by.

Likewise when authors draw analogies or comparisons, the referenced person or event rarely deserves its own entry. In a book on ancient Egypt, I found the indexer had included entries to “skyscrapers” and “New York City” both on the same page. These terms jumped out as unexpected so I looked them up in the book to learn that the author had compared the pyramids saying that they would “outlast New York City’s skyscrapers.” There was no other discussion of NYC or modern structures in the book. Again reject the impulse to pick these up – they are not on point with the focus of the book, and not something the book’s audience will be looking for or expecting. Skip such a passing mention without a second thought.

Users don’t want to be sent to “empty” information. When the page has no content to support the creation of an entry (i.e., sufficient information so that users learn something about the relevant topic), there is no point in referring users there. As I mentioned above, the introductory chapter or introductory section in a chapter presents a trap for the unwary indexer. On the one hand this material appears crammed full of indexable statements, but in reality it should be treated very lightly by the indexer.

In a book about China’s relations with Latin America, an opening paragraph provides some sweeping statements:

At a time when the United States is concentrating a great deal of attention and resources on the war on terrorism, China has made important inroads in expanding its influence abroad, particularly in developing regions such as Southeast Asia and Africa. Another relatively recent development in China’s “going global” strategy is a new interest in engaging Latin America. China’s expanding diplomatic and economic ties with the region, the backyard of the United States, have awakened new concerns in U.S. policy circles. Skeptical policymakers in the United States view China’s new presence in Latin America as an opening salvo of a larger diplomatic offensive by Beijing to challenge U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere. A more benign viewpoint considers China’s expanding ties with Latin America a natural manifestation of its growing need for commodities and energy resources—more of an opportunity than a threat.

All of the topics raised here will form major themes in the book: China’s strategy worldwide, and in particular, in Latin America, and the U.S. response to this expansion of Chinese foreign policy into its global neighborhood. Is it necessary to create entries for the introduction of these topics on page 1? Rarely does an author have much on the first page that deserves an entry in the index. I recently reviewed an index by a novice that had close to 30 entries from the first page of the book! After I was done editing the index, only three of the entries survived. Try to avoid being sucked into making entries for material that only serves to set the stage, makes assertions that the author will take up in depth later, and summarizes the same points that will most likely be summarized again in the conclusion.

The same principles apply frequently to the start of a chapter. Here is the opening paragraph to a chapter that will discuss the emergence of the modern president. (It comes from a book on presidential power, full of many references to each president.)

The 1932 elections marked the beginning of a new political era. The Democratic candidate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, became the first member of his party since Franklin Pierce in 1852 to be elected president with a majority of the national popular vote. In the electoral college, Roosevelt scored a 472-59 landslide, carrying forty-two states to six for the incumbent, Herbert C. Hoover. In the new Congress, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 60 to 35 in the Senate and 310 to 117 in the House. FDR's victory indicated, in the opinion of the progressive Republican journalist William Allen White, "a firm desire on the part of the American people to use government as an agency for human welfare."

The paragraph contains numerous facts, names, details, etc., many of which the indexer can pass right over. You need entries for Roosevelt, Hoover, and White, but should skip Pierce (a time marker), the electoral college (there is nothing about the college itself), or the political parties (again, nothing here about the parties themselves). The author has engaged in "scene setting" as a prelude for the discussion of the New Deal administration and the institutionalization of presidential power that arose from that point in history.

When you add unwarranted references, you hurt the quality of the index in two ways. First, you add spurious entries that fail to lead to useful information; they irritate users by sending them places that waste their time. Second, you add to the size of the index and make it more difficult to use. These superficial entries start to suffocate the meaningful entries. They slow down the user who has more to scan to find the "true" subject matter.

Researchers don't want to spend time looking at extraneous references, and you don't want to spend time making them!

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